

The Years Of Living Splendidly

Sigourney Weaver hits it in movies and marriage



Shakespeare would have had a fine time with Sigourney Weaver: creating Viola and Beatrice with her in mind, collaborating with her on the odd comic masterpiece, vagabonding through London in some very comely company. Shaw would have been smitten by her combination of regal beauty and irreverent wit, of life force and light farce. The old Hollywood masters of penthouse comedy would have embraced this screwball Garbo, alive and kicking up her heels.

But this is 1986, when women on screen have been liberated from goddess-hood and turned into grunts. So Sigourney Weaver—actor, playwright, *bonne vivante*, gun-control activist and, at a sensational 5 ft. 10½ in., just possibly the world's most beautiful tall smart woman—is striding toward stardom in her Marks & Spencer underwear and shouldering enough artillery to keep Caspar Weinberger happy till next Thursday. *Aliens*, indeed; has anyone thought of starring her in a movie called *Humans*?

Enough carping. In an age that rewards strength over grace, let there be women as strong as Weaver's Ripley. May homeless children have no less ferocious an adoptive mother; may extraterrestrial predators meet no less resourceful an antagonist. Trust that a million moviegoers will find the glamour beneath the



Ripley, believe it or not, in Manhattan's Central Park, a few blocks from her home

smudged sweat on Ripley's face, and the feral humor in her challenge to Big Mama Alien: "Get away from her, you bitch!"

There is plenty to be grateful for in James Cameron's electrifying parable of two righteous single mothers, one an earthling in her mid-80s (after 57 years of floating in hypersleep), the other a mammoth uggy bug. Among these perks is a golden opportunity for Hollywood. It can finally discover in Weaver the stellar creature that Ivan Reitman, her director in *Ghostbusters*, has already proclaimed her: "the perfect contemporary heroine."

Perfect. Perfect has always been the problem. By today's movie conventions, Weaver, 36, is too gorgeous to be ordinary, too smart to be sexy, too sensible to be interesting. Hollywood lusts for the diseased oyster these days, not the pearl. And so, while notching a worthy stage career on Broadway (*Hurlyburly*) and in regional

theater, Weaver has been placed in the cluttered corners of raucous comedies starring *Saturday Night Live* alumni (*Ghostbusters*, *Deal of the Century*) or at the cores of enigmatic dramas (*Eyewitness*, *The Year of Living Dangerously*). She is Dom Pérignon in a town built to sell Dr Pepper. And she is too darn tall.

In *Alien* and its new sequel, Weaver has been able to commandeer center screen with a character she larkishly calls "Rambolina." Beneath the armor, though, she has found exotic soulmates: "I secretly structured myself to play Ripley like Henry V and like the women warriors of classic Chinese literature." *Aliens* was no take-the-money-and-run proposition (though she was paid \$1 million, about 30 times her salary for the 1979 original). As Cameron remarks, "She's intensely prepared. Her copy of the script was marked with 17 different colors of ink. The margin notes were incredible: she got the dramatic significance of almost every line of dialogue and how each one might tie in with a later scene."

Aliens reveals only flashes of Weaver's most distinctive gifts, but it has given her a powerful screen personality in a potential hit film. As Peter Weir, the Australian director of *Living Dangerously*, avers, "She is one of the few women who can light the screen up. I will be very happy to see her running around in space fighting monsters." Perhaps the film's success will end Weaver's Hollywood run-around and give her an actor-producer's clout. And then beware. Sophisticated romances, wry talkfests, even a musical—Sigourney the star has surprises in store.

That was so even before she called herself Sigourney. Susan was the name chosen by her parents Elizabeth Inglis,

The devil made her do it: Sigourney, with Rick Moranis, in *Ghostbusters*

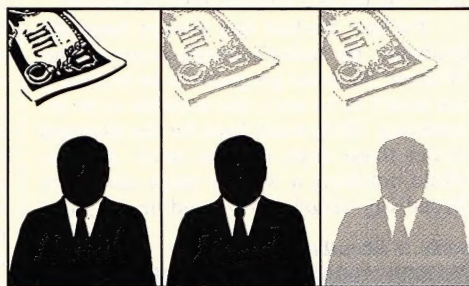


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a British stage actress, and Sylvester Weaver, famous as "Pat" when he was president of NBC in the 1950s. The Weavers lived in a Sutton Place apartment once owned by Marion Davies; Sigourney remembers swinging on the golden gates leading to the living room. "I was a privileged, pampered, sheltered child," she says of this WASP gentility. "It was as though every day had a happy ending. My brother Trajan and I had gold cards giving us the run of Radio City Music Hall. I thought everyone's father was head of a network. Though it made things confusing when I was learning the alphabet—how did it begin, ABC or NBC?"

Her artistic favorites were rats (*The Nutcracker Suite*), mice (Walt Disney's *Cinderella*), whales (John Huston's *Moby Dick*) and the sexual cannibals of Tennessee Williams' *Suddenly, Last Summer*, which so seized her imagination that, she says, "my parents were afraid I'd try to eat someone on the beach." In fact, her mother had a deeper fear: "From the moment she was born I was scared stiff she'd turn to acting." Not at first. But there was an irrepressible flair for the dramatic. At 14, Susan read *The Great Gatsby* and dubbed herself Sigourney (after the unseen aunt of Gatsby's sleek-snob lady friend Jordan Baker). "I was so tall," Weaver declares, "and Susan was such a short name. To my ear Sigourney was a stage name—long and curvy, with a musical ring." For nearly a year after this self-baptism, her parents called her simply S, just in case the girl changed her mind, and her name, again.

The name stayed; the enthusiasms wandered. One year she made her society debut: "I thought of myself as an ugly duckling, tall and shy, and for that coming-out party I had turned into a tiny swan." The next year she was in Israel telling her mom, "I want to stay and help." Recalls Elizabeth: "This was at a stage when she wouldn't make her bed. But she had the Sigourney Serious Look—and when you see it, you act." Now the WASP princess trades in her deb gown for khaki and operates the potato-peeling machine at the Hill of Isaac Kibbutz. "I tried to improve the machine's performance, and for a while it did work faster. So fast that it blew up. The supervisor said I was a humiliation to the Jewish race." That adventure ended in three weeks.

Her dramatics at Stanford University lasted three years. "Every day was a happening," she says. "I wore an elf costume—red pantaloons, vest and hat, all festooned with blue pompons—and lived with my boyfriend in a tree house, dining on vegetables we stole from the experimental garden. One day, for a linguistics presentation, we threw pies at each other, then tossed tiny parachutes at the other class members. The professor gave us both A's." And now in May '68, here is La Pa-

sionaria Sigourney, set to exhort the students with quotations from Chairman Mao's Little Red Book. But it is missing from her tote bag. She grabs her address book (same size, same color) and waves it above her head, declaiming her memorized Mao. "They responded wildly," Weaver recalls, "and we marched off to the ROTC building and set it afire."

Sigourney found it tougher igniting her teachers at the Yale School of Drama. "Yale was a joyless experience," she says. "It almost destroyed my career. I had so much confidence when I got there, and so little when I left. For six months they



Fun couple: Weaver and Simpson at Williamstown, Mass.

"She's very smart. She's very affectionate. I'm very lucky."

wouldn't cast me in a play, and I was forced to perform in the campus cabaret." Poor, lucky Sigourney. For it was there she teamed up with Christopher Durang, who would soon torch off-Broadway with the blazing sitcom absurdism of *Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All for You* and *The Marriage of Bette and Boo*. Says Durang, 37: "I'd written an anarchist musical called *Better Dead than Sorry*. Sigourney sang the title song while receiving shock treatment. It was the first time I got a sense of how charismatic an actor she is."

With Durang's acute perception that "there's something extremely funny about a beautiful woman being silly," a great friendship was born. She gave him class; he gave her sexy roles. Sigourney played a murderous multiple schizophrenic Electra figure in Durang's *Titanic*, a

woman who dates a bisexual analyst in *Beyond Therapy*. Together they wrote and performed *Das Lusitania Songspiel*, a deliciously rancid Brecht-meets-Broadway parody, and *Naked Lunch*, a fake interview with Voracious Starlet Sigourney Weaver that, in expanded form, may soon be a major motion picture. "She is a very strong collaborator," says Durang. "The furthest-out ideas come from Sigourney. I, however, type faster." Of their paldom, Weaver says, "We have so much fun together. Our friendship is in a class all by itself. It's the icing on the cake of life."

The cake itself came in two slices: first career, then marriage. In the seven years since she won her first starring role, in *Alien* (in 1977 she had a walk-on role in Woody Allen's *Annie Hall*), she has made seven films, including two that are still unreleased in the U.S.: *Half Moon Street* with Michael Caine and the French-language *One Woman or Two* with Gérard Depardieu. Weaver the stage artist refuses to condescend to cinema. "There's a purity in film work," she observes. "It takes courage, leaping into the void every day on set. You can't hold back; you can't come back to it the next day. It's a one-shot deal, just like life."

Except that life gave her two shots at her future husband. Jim Simpson, 30, was a child actor in his native Hawaii; at 17 he was earning \$2,000 a week on the TV series *Hawaii Five-O*. A graduate of Boston University and the Yale School of Drama, Simpson met Sigourney in 1981 at the Williamstown, Mass., summer theater festival, where he is now a director. Nothing happened. Then in 1983, after conniving to invite him to a Halloween party, she snared her beau, and a year later they were married at Pat Weaver's Long Island yacht club. Two ministers, a woman and a man, performed the ceremony. As party favors the guests received washaway tattoos. A bagpipe and bongo drums underscored the service. "It was great fun," says Bill Murray, Weaver's co-star in *Ghostbusters*. "But then I've never seen Sigourney give a bad party."

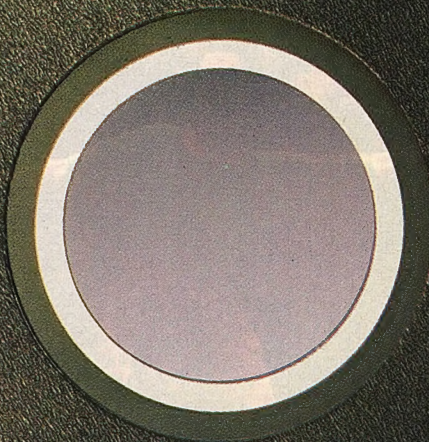
The party's not over. It has just begun with Jim, who says of Sigourney, "She's very smart. She's very affectionate. I'm very lucky." There are children in their future. And a Durang; Chris and Sigourney will keep acting, writing and capering. Though Weaver says she would "play anything—a broom, a mop" in a Woody Allen film, she wants to be more than a housewife's helper in other roles. "Usually women in films have had to carry the burden of sympathy, only coming to life when a man enters. Doesn't everyone know that women are incredibly strong?" Right you are, Sigourney. Anyway, no one would argue with a woman who patented perfection, then showed how to have a wonderful time in spite of it.

—By Richard Corliss.
Reported by Dean Breilis/New York



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